Poverty as a Social Phenomenon: From Russian Classical Literature to Contemporary Forms of Vulnerability in Western Societies

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Introduction

Poverty is one of those states of society that is at once familiar to everyone and yet fully understood by almost no one. It is discussed in statistics, in electoral programmes, in charitable campaigns, in everyday conversations, but far more rarely is it considered as the result of concrete political and historical decisions. Poverty is too often described as a collection of individual biographies, as personal failure or lack of ability, and too rarely as the structural effect of how the state, the market, institutions, and culture are organised. Yet if we look at poverty in the perspective of two centuries, it becomes evident that this is not a random deviation, but a stable product of certain social mechanisms. Nineteenth-century Russian literature, perhaps better than any other European tradition, recorded poverty in its inner, human, microscopic reality. For Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorky, poverty was not an abstract social concept, but the everyday experience of millions of people, shaping their thoughts, relationships, choices, and limits of freedom. These authors did not merely depict material deprivation; they analysed how poverty intrudes upon dignity, destroys subjectivity, creates shame and invisibility, forms specific types of dependence and social isolation. Their texts have become an optical

instrument that allows us to see poverty not only as an economic indicator, but as a condition of the soul and of society.

The contemporary world, formally far removed from the realities of the nineteenth century, reveals alarming similarities in the mechanisms by which poverty is reproduced. The United States, proud of its competitive economy, has created an entire stratum of people who work, pay taxes reliably, yet cannot move beyond basic survival. The European Union, built on the idea of social solidarity, is confronted with stable zones of chronic vulnerability, whether in southern Italy, the suburbs of French metropolises, or post-industrial regions of Britain. Within seemingly favourable statistical averages there exist people and entire groups for whom poverty is not a temporary condition, but a long-term, sometimes inherited, structure of life.

This work is an attempt to view poverty as a multilayered phenomenon that brings together literary testimony, historical experience, and contemporary sociological observation. First, I am interested in how poverty appears in the Russian classics: not as decorative background, but as the central axis of human conflict. Second, it is important to understand how the socio-economic structure of the late Russian Empire generated a stable, hard-to-overcome poverty, and how these mechanisms intersect with today's structures of inequality. Third, it is necessary to examine poverty in twenty-first-century developed countries, where formally there is a high standard of living, yet in practice new forms of vulnerability arise: working poverty, the degradation of peripheries, the invisible impoverishment of the middle strata.

The eight chapters of this work consecutively unfold different dimensions of poverty. The first is devoted to the way poverty is experienced as an inner state of the person in nineteenth-century Russian literature; the second to the

historical mechanisms of poverty in the Russian Empire and their reflection in the texts of the classics; the third to contemporary forms of poverty in developed countries; the fourth to a comparison of historical and contemporary structures of poverty; the fifth to the preservation of human dignity under conditions of material pressure; the sixth to social isolation as a consequence of poverty; the seventh to the stigmatisation of the poor and the transformation of material lack into a moral stigma; the eighth to the phenomenon of contemporary working poverty, when a person is employed but his or her income suffices only for biological existence.

The aim of this study is to show that poverty does not disappear along with technological progress and GDP growth, because its roots lie not in the level of development, but in the organisation of power and the distribution of opportunities. Literature, history, and contemporary sociology, considered together, allow us to reconsider the familiar idea of "personal responsibility" and to see behind poverty not private destinies, but systemic decisions.

Chapter I. Poverty as an Inner State of the Person in Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature

Nineteenth-century Russian literature created a vast pantheon of poor people. They do not exist at the periphery of the plot, but at its centre. Their poverty is not simply the absence of money; it is the constant psychological background that shapes their language, gestures, decisions, habits of thought, even their notion of their own worth. To read these texts, it is not enough to know the economic realities of the epoch; it is necessary to see how material need is transformed into subtle inner work, sometimes invisible, yet destructive.

Makar Devushkin in Dostoevsky's Poor Folk, one of the most precise portraits of the "little man" in European literature, is poor to the point of the ridiculous and of tears. Yet his tragedy does not lie in his threadbare frock coat, but in the fact that he knows how others see him. He literally lives in the gaze of others. His letters to Varvara are full of apologies for being unable to dress better, for his miserable room, for the cheapness of his presents. He experiences his poverty as a constant threat of exposure: he may be seen as he really is—a man without means, without status, without protection. Poverty here is a condition of perpetual shame, where the very fact of existing in constrained circumstances is perceived as almost a moral stain.

In Crime and Punishment poverty permeates the fictional world almost physically. Raskolnikov's destitution, the cramped space of his room, his inability to pay for his studies, the sense of a dead end—none of this is mere detail. It is the environment that slowly but inevitably pushes him toward the idea of a "right to blood". Poverty does not justify murder, but it serves as the catalyst of an inner split: the person, driven to the edge of existence, seeks a theoretical construction that would legitimise stepping beyond the law. Marmeladov, with his terrible confession, condenses a ruined human life in which poverty has become not background, but central plot. He does not merely drink; he flees from the awareness of his inability to provide for his family. His wife and children are a living reminder that here poverty is not "too little money", but the daily impossibility of not being guilty.

Tolstoy approaches poverty from another angle. He is interested not only in the inner world of the poor person, but also in the moral state of a society that accepts poverty as normal. In the scenes of peasant life in Anna Karenina or in individual stories such as "What Men Live By", "After the Ball", "Master and

Man", Tolstoy shows how deeply poverty is inscribed into the social structure. The wealthy can afford philanthropy, charity, gestures of "condescension". The poor, however, are deprived of the possibility to exercise moral choice on the same scale: all their efforts are consumed by survival. This creates an asymmetry: the moral evaluation of the actions of the rich and the poor is constructed as though on the same level, while the initial conditions are radically different.

In Chekhov, poverty is deprived of both a heroic profile and tragic pose. It is not always named directly, yet it is present in the details: inadequate nutrition, limited opportunities, the absence of choice. In "Peasants" he does not show a single poor hero, but an entire world in which want has become the only possible mode of existence. People do not dramatise their condition; they live as though things simply cannot be otherwise. This is perhaps the most frightening element: poverty becomes the norm of perception, not the exception.

"Anna on the Neck" deserves particular attention. This is not a story about a "simple poor girl"; it is a story about an unequal marriage into which Anna is pushed by her family's poverty and by the narrowness of realistic alternatives. Her consent is not an expression of personal greed, but the result of pressure from circumstances, when refusal would mean continued destitution and hopelessness for her relatives. Chekhov shows how poverty can turn a life decision into a transaction: youth, beauty, and liveliness become resources exchanged for material rescue. The humiliations Anna experiences are rooted primarily in the social and institutional world into which she is absorbed: a rigid hierarchy of respectability, rank, and ritual, where she is treated more as a function of her husband's status than as a person. Poverty here is not merely a prehistory; it is the source of an inner fracture—between her impulse to save her

family and the difficulty of preserving self-respect within a choice dictated not by freedom, but by necessity. Chekhov does not declaim a “loss of dignity”; he demonstrates how dignity must be preserved under conditions where the original act of choosing was structurally constrained.

Maxim Gorky, already formed at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, shifts the theme of poverty into a more explicit socio-political register. In The Lower Depths his characters inhabit a flophouse, literally “at the bottom” of society, yet they constantly discuss questions of truth, freedom, and the right to respect. Gorky demonstrates that poverty is not only a material limit, but also a vantage point from which the injustice of social organisation is seen with particular clarity. His characters, deprived of property, recognition, and prospects, nonetheless retain the capacity for reflection and judgement. Poverty here is not proof of a person’s “worthlessness”, but an indicator of how society treats those who have proved themselves the weakest.

Taken together, these texts show that for the Russian classics poverty is not “background”, but a specific state of the world. It permeates space, language, gestures, motives, while at the same time being deeply rooted in social structures. Literature thus becomes a form of moral sociology: it studies not only how poverty is arranged externally, but also how it lives inside the person.

Chapter II. Historical Mechanisms of Poverty in the Late Russian Empire and Their Reflection in Literature

To understand the resilience of poverty as described by Russian writers, it is necessary to move beyond the literary text and to examine the socio-economic context. The Russian Empire of the second half of the nineteenth century

underwent sweeping reforms, yet these were contradictory, partial, and often aimed at preserving the old structure of power under the guise of external renewal. In such a system, poverty did not diminish; it took new forms.

The Emancipation of the serfs formally freed peasants, but the economic conditions of this liberation entrenched their debt dependence. Landlord estates were to be redeemed, and peasants had to pay redemption payments for decades. In practice this meant that legal freedom coexisted with economic unfreedom. At the level of everyday life this was expressed in the fact that peasants continued to work the same land, now as "free debtors". In literature, this condition is reflected in the figures of peasants who, as in Tolstoy's works, are formally free but live under circumstances in which their horizon of opportunities has scarcely changed.

In parallel, an industrialisation process was under way. Large cities such as Petersburg, Moscow, and industrial centres drew in people deprived of means of subsistence on the land. A new class—the workers—was formed. Yet the state and entrepreneurs did not create protective mechanisms that could mitigate the social consequences of this process. Working days were exhausting, labour conditions harsh, wages low, housing overcrowded and unsanitary. The classic image of the "corners" and "closets" in Dostoevsky's Petersburg texts is not an artistic exaggeration, but a reflection of the real spatial organisation of urban poverty.

Poverty in the Russian Empire was linked not only to the economy, but also to the absence of effective social institutions. Education remained largely inaccessible, especially for peasants and women. Social mobility was minimal: a person born into a poor family had almost no chance of altering his or her status absent extraordinary circumstances. Literature captures this sense of a

sealed space: the characters of Dostoevsky and Chekhov constantly experience a feeling of being "shut in" within their social layer. They can dream, philosophise, plan, but real channels for realising these plans are almost non-existent.

It is also important that poverty was culturally legitimised. There existed an idea of the "naturalness" of estate differences and of the expectation that the poor should be content with their place. Attempts to step beyond one's estate role were perceived as presumptuous rather than as normal human aspiration. In this sense literature played a subversive role: it depicted the poor as people capable of feelings, thought, and inner depth no less than representatives of higher strata.

Gorky, already standing at the threshold of the revolutionary era, sees in poverty not merely an "old tradition" but the result of the structural cruelty of the system. His works are suffused with the sense that the poor are deprived not only of material goods but also of recognition. They live in a space of constant humiliation, where virtually any gesture on their part can be judged "inappropriate". This is no longer just a statement of poverty but a direct challenge to a society organised in such a way that want becomes the norm for the majority.

Historical analysis shows that poverty in the late nineteenth-century Russian Empire resulted from a combination of economic reforms conducted in the interests of the elite, the absence of a full-fledged social policy, cultural legitimisation of inequality, and the political exclusion of the majority of the population. Literature, absorbing these processes, constructed an image of poverty as a systemic phenomenon rather than an incidental biographical fact.

Chapter III. Poverty in Twenty-First-Century Developed Countries: New Forms of an Old Problem

If we shift to the twenty-first century and examine the situation in developed countries, we may initially succumb to the illusion that historical poverty has been left behind. Buildings, technologies, levels of consumption, the visual shell of urban life create the impression that society has reached a qualitatively new level. However, statistics and observation show that poverty has not disappeared; it has merely changed the colour of its scenery. Its forms have become less visible from the outside, but no less destructive within.

In the United States, poverty exists in several dimensions. The first is classical homelessness: people living in tents, cars, temporary shelters. This is hard to miss and hard to ignore. But beyond it there is the poverty of the employed, whose incomes are insufficient to cover basic needs, let alone savings and investment in the future. A person may leave home for work every morning and yet have no financial cushion, living in a regime of uninterrupted anxiety: an unexpected medical bill, a car breakdown, a delayed wage payment can entirely destroy his or her fragile balance.

In Europe the situation appears milder, yet the structural threats are similar. Countries with developed systems of social protection—Germany, France, the Scandinavian states—record growing inequality and the emergence of segments of the population for whom the social elevator has ceased to function. Young people face uncertainty, temporary contracts, and an inability to plan a long-term life. Southern regions of Europe live with chronic unemployment and the outflow of able-bodied populations.

A distinctive feature of contemporary poverty is its “invisibility”. A person may

possess a smartphone, internet access, respectable clothing, and may not outwardly appear destitute, yet be in a state of constant shortage. Digital infrastructure and mass culture create an illusion of participation in common life —social media, streaming content, visual saturation—but behind this there may lurk the absence of basic security.

In developed countries today poverty is not reducible to a lack of income. It includes the inaccessibility of housing in major cities, rising costs of education and healthcare, instability of employment, and debt burdens. All this creates a new social architecture in which poverty ceases to be a peripheral phenomenon and begins to penetrate multiple strata of society.

Chapter IV. Comparing Historical and Contemporary Forms of Poverty: Stability of Mechanisms amid Changing Scenery

A comparison of poverty in the nineteenth-century Russian Empire and in twenty-first-century developed countries reveals an important paradox. Outwardly, the world has changed radically: forms of labour, technologies, political systems, the level of formal rights, cultural codes—everything is different. Yet if we shift our gaze from external forms to the mechanisms that reproduce poverty, the similarities are striking.

The first recurring mechanism is structural vulnerability. In the nineteenth century peasants and workers were vulnerable due to the absence of property, debt dependence, estate constraints, and de facto lack of rights. In the twenty-first century vulnerability takes other forms: absence of stable contracts, reliance on credit, inability to accumulate savings, lack of access to quality education and healthcare. In both cases people live without a “margin of

safety". Any crisis—illness, job loss, family catastrophe—knocks them out of their habitual lives and pushes them into long-term poverty.

The second mechanism is institutional asymmetry. In the Russian Empire laws were formally reformed, yet actual institutions served the interests of the upper strata. Today, in developed countries, a different yet related phenomenon can be observed: juridical equality coexists with real advantages for those possessing resources and access to information. Strong groups more often influence the design of economic and social policy; weaker groups become the objects of decisions, but not their subjects. This is visible in the areas of taxation, housing policy, and labour-market reforms.

The third mechanism is the cultural justification of poverty. In the past the poor were regarded as "naturally" lower; today they are often portrayed as "insufficiently hardworking", "bad with money", "having made poor choices". In both cases society absolves itself of responsibility for the structure of conditions, shifting it onto the individual. Nineteenth-century literature exposed this hypocritical logic; contemporary sociology, in essence, continues the same work in different terminology.

Finally, a fourth mechanism is the reproduction of poverty through limiting the future. In both the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries the poor are more constrained in access to education, health care, and cultural capital. Their children are highly likely to find themselves in conditions similar to those of their parents, even if formally they possess more rights and opportunities. In this way poverty is transformed from an individual condition into an inherited structure.

Chapter V. Human Dignity under Conditions of Poverty: Inner Work

against External Pressure

One of the most difficult dimensions of poverty to analyse is the question of human dignity. In official documents, political speeches, and philosophical declarations dignity is proclaimed as an inalienable right of every human being. In everyday reality, however, poverty often becomes a practice of its gradual erosion. The question is not whether the poor "lose their dignity", but how much inner work they must undertake to preserve it.

In Russian literature the dignity of the poor hero is never given automatically. Makar Devushkin constantly oscillates between the desire to maintain self-respect and a sense of his own insignificance. His shame is directed not only toward others, but toward himself. He knows what a "respectable" person ought to look like and sees how far he is from this image. Poverty strikes him not only as physical crampedness, but as a continual reminder of the "wrongness" of his existence.

Marmeladov embodies another type of dignity's destruction: he still remembers what he wanted to be, yet he sees what he has become under pressure from circumstances. His confession is saturated with self-abasement, yet it also contains a muted protest: he knows that poverty is not solely his fault, but he lacks a language in which to formulate this fully.

In Chekhov, the preservation of dignity in poverty is often bound up with silence. Characters living in constrained circumstances rarely speak openly about their situation. They do not permit themselves loud accusations, yet their inner tension manifests itself in a specific restraint, in bitter humour, in a refusal of illusions. Anna in "Anna on the Neck" is an example of how dignity does not disappear but is forced into concealment. Her marriage consent, dictated by her

family's poverty, places her in a position of dependence. She is compelled to tolerate humiliations and to accept that she is perceived, in the social world of rank and respectability, more as an accessory of her husband's success than as a person. Yet inwardly she preserves the capacity to see falsity, to notice injustice, to distinguish genuine feeling from social play. Her dignity resides not in public recognition but in an inner refusal to accept the role into which she is driven.

Contemporary studies show that poverty creates a special mode of existence in which individuals must constantly balance between the necessity to ask, to depend, to adapt, and the desire to remain themselves. Applicants for social assistance frequently encounter humiliating verification procedures. This is true even in formally prosperous countries where bureaucratic apparatuses are structured in such a way that every request for support reminds the petitioner of his or her "lower" status.

Dignity under conditions of poverty demands from a person constant effort: not to accept imposed stigma, not to agree that one's worth is measured by income, not to destroy oneself inwardly under the pressure of perceived injustice. These efforts are often invisible, yet they determine whether a person remains inwardly free even when outwardly constrained.

Chapter VI. Social Isolation as a Consequence of Poverty: When One Remains Within Society yet Outside Its Life

Poverty almost inevitably leads to some form of social isolation. This is not only about physical distancing, when the poor live in separate districts, slums, or on urban peripheries. Far more important are the invisible forms of isolation:

when a person is formally “among people” but is in fact excluded from the space of reciprocal connections and influence.

In Russian literature, social isolation of poor characters appears as invisibility. Devushkin inhabits the same streets as other residents of Petersburg, yet he is virtually unnoticed. He lives at an edge of the social map from which movement toward the centre is impossible. Marmeladov, appearing in the tavern, brings with him a sense of alienness: he seems to violate the respectable surface of a world in which poverty is habitually ignored or discussed at a safe distance. Chekhov depicts isolation as a quotidian fact. The protagonists of “Peasants” live in a village formally surrounded by relatives, neighbours, and children, yet they are isolated from any other worlds: they have no access to education, culture, or politics; they have no resource that would allow them to see their lives from the outside and imagine them otherwise. They are not merely poor; they are isolated within a familiar yet harsh and apparently “unchangeable” order.

In contemporary cities, the social isolation of the poor manifests itself in geographic segregation: disadvantaged neighbourhoods, under-resourced suburban zones, migrant dormitories. Alongside this, however, there exists institutional isolation. A person may live in the city centre yet be effectively excluded from the same services accessed by others: lacking funds for cultural events, for children’s extracurricular activities, for the forms of leisure that bind together members of a given stratum. His or her life is reduced to work and basic survival, and this makes him or her a participant only in the lowest layer of social reality.

Isolation is aggravated by the fact that the poor often disappear from public space in a symbolic sense. In political debates they are used as arguments but

rarely as real participants. In media narratives they appear either as objects of compassion or as objects of blame, but virtually never as fully legitimate speaking subjects. This continues the same line that Russian writers discerned in the nineteenth century: the poor person has fewer possibilities to be heard, even when he or she speaks.

Thus, social isolation is not only a consequence of poverty but also a factor in its reproduction. Individuals who lack networks, trust, and participation in common affairs have fewer chances to change their situation. Poverty becomes not merely a level of income but a form of loneliness within a society in which, formally, no one is alone.

Chapter VII. Stigmatising the Poor: When Material Vulnerability Becomes a Moral Mark

Stigmatisation is another crucial mechanism through which poverty is entrenched and normalised. It consists in the fact that poor people are treated not merely as individuals in difficult circumstances, but as bearers of a particular "defect": they are portrayed as lazy, shortsighted, uneducated, unable to plan. From an individual circumstance, poverty is transformed into a character trait.

In Russian literature this mechanism is clearly visible in the ways others relate to poor heroes. Devushkin is constantly inwardly prepared to be criticised or mocked; he begs forgiveness in advance for his very existence. Marmeladov is condemned not only for drunkenness but also for having "brought his family to ruin", although the structure of society leaves him very little room for any other outcome. In "Anna on the Neck", Anna is initially perceived by her husband's

social circle as someone “below their level”, and her past as a poor girl becomes grounds for condescending attitudes that then serve to justify the reduction of her personhood to a social function.

Contemporary societies reproduce the stigmatisation of poverty in other forms but with similar content. In American culture, the myth endures that every person can “make themselves” if they try hard enough. From this myth an insidious logic follows: if someone is poor, they did not try hard enough. Structural analysis vanishes, and moral judgement comes to the fore.

In the European context, the poor are often portrayed as “non-integrated”, “unduly dependent on benefits”, “poorly adapted”. Stigma is particularly strong in relation to migrants: poverty is associated with cultural “incompatibility” rather than with legal, economic, and administrative barriers.

Stigmatisation undermines the capacity of individuals to seek assistance. When poverty is declared the consequence of personal guilt, the request for support begins to be perceived by the person as a confession of his or her own “inadequacy”. Internal stigma often proves stronger than external stigma: people begin to see themselves through the eyes of a society that condemns them. The classics described this mechanism in showing characters ashamed of their poverty. Today it has only intensified, acquiring new languages and forms.

Stigma, therefore, is not merely an unpleasant social backdrop; it is an instrument that allows society to avoid altering the structure of conditions while shifting all responsibility for poverty onto those who live in it.

Chapter VIII. Contemporary Working Poverty: When Labour is Sufficient for Survival but Not for Life

A special place in contemporary discussions of poverty is occupied by the phenomenon of working poverty. This concerns individuals who have regular employment, sometimes more than one job, yet whose income barely suffices to pay for housing, food, and mandatory bills. They do not correspond to the familiar image of “the poor”: they do not beg in the street, do not live outdoors, do not look “socially degraded”. But in practice they are deprived of what may be called life space: they have no means for leisure, for cultural development, for education, for savings.

In countries with high living costs, a working person may spend up to half or more of their income on rent. The rest goes toward utilities, transport, food, and basic needs of children. Under such conditions any unforeseen expense becomes catastrophic. People live in a state of constant tension that is hard to call a full life; it is rather existence in a regime of immediate response to the next bill.

Contemporary working poverty destroys the traditional linkage between “labour” and “a decent life”. In public consciousness, the conviction still lives that work is a path to independence, to accumulation, to improving one’s conditions; yet for many people reality does not confirm this formula. This creates a specific psychological conflict: individuals do “everything right”, but the result remains disproportionate to their efforts.

This form of poverty is particularly dangerous because it masquerades as normality. Such people are rarely the subjects of media reports; they are difficult to “identify” on the street. They live in the same districts, use the same public spaces, yet their inner experience is one of ongoing economic fragility. They are not poor in the traditional sense, but nor are they secure.

For children growing up in such families, the future is pre-restricted: they

confront barriers in access to extracurricular education, cultural resources, foreign languages, and activities that build cultural and social capital. As a result, working poverty becomes intergenerational: formally parents are employed, yet in practice they fail to provide their children with a start different from their own.

Contemporary working poverty is evidence that an economic system may display high macro-level indicators while leaving a significant share of the population in a state of chronic instability. This is not a "residual problem", but a structural feature of a model in which labour and housing markets are organised such that the price of participation in society becomes too high for many.

Conclusion

Considering poverty through the prism of Russian literature, the historical experience of the Russian Empire, and the contemporary realities of developed countries, one inevitably arrives at the conclusion that this phenomenon cannot be explained solely by individual attributes. Poverty is, first and foremost, the result of how society is organised: how resources are distributed, what decisions the state takes, which groups are given a voice and which are assigned the role of statistical material.

The Russian classics taught us to see in poverty not an abstract "social problem" but a human condition that affects dignity, freedom, the capacity to love, to believe, to hope. The history of the Russian Empire showed how flawed reforms and the estate system generated stable poverty among entire classes.

Contemporary developed countries demonstrate that high levels of technology

and formal rights do not preclude the reproduction of poverty—now in new forms.

Poverty proves to be simultaneously a material, moral, political, and cultural reality. It erodes dignity, leads to social isolation, generates stigma, and deprives people of a future. For this reason, discussion of poverty cannot be reduced to advice on personal finance or exhortations to “work harder”. Such a discussion inevitably raises questions of justice, responsibility, and the organisation of power.

If for nineteenth-century literature describing poverty meant giving a voice to those who were not heard, then for contemporary scholarship the most important task is to prevent poverty from once again becoming invisible behind attractive figures and generalities. Each time society speaks of “inefficient individuals” or “unsuccessful biographies”, it avoids looking at its own structures. In this sense, poverty is a mirror in which not only the situation of particular people is reflected, but also the genuine face of society itself.